Mesopotamian Creation Myths

Stories describing creation are prominent in many cultures of the world. In Mesopotamia, the surviving evidence from the third millennium to the end of the first millennium B.C. indicates that although many of the gods were associated with natural forces, no single myth addressed issues of initial creation. It was simply assumed that the gods existed before the world was formed. Unfortunately, very little survives of Sumerian literature from the third millennium B.C. Several fragmentary tablets contain references to a time before the pantheon of the gods, when only the Earth (Sumerian: ki) and Heavens (Sumerian: an) existed. All was dark, there existed neither sunlight nor moonlight; however, the earth was green and water was in the ground, although there was no vegetation. More is known from Sumerian poems that date to the beginning centuries of the second millennium B.C.

A Sumerian myth known today as “Gilgamesh and the Netherworld” opens with a mythological prologue. It assumes that the gods and the universe already exist and that once a long time ago the heavens and earth were united, only later to be split apart. Later, humankind was created and the great gods divided up the job of managing and keeping control over heavens, earth, and the Netherworld.

The origins of humans are described in another early second-millennium Sumerian poem, “The Song of the Hoe.” In this myth, as in many other Sumerian stories, the god Enlil is described as the deity who separates heavens and earth and creates humankind. Humanity is formed to provide for the gods, a common theme in Mesopotamian literature.

In the Sumerian poem “The Debate between Grain and Sheep,” the earth first appeared barren, without grain, sheep, or goats. People went naked. They ate grass for nourishment and drank water from ditches. Later, the gods created sheep and grain and gave them to humankind as sustenance. According to “The Debate between Bird and Fish,” water for human consumption did not exist until Enki, lord of wisdom, created the Tigris and Euphrates and caused water to flow into them from the mountains. He also created the smaller streams and watercourses, established sheepfolds, marshes, and reedbeds, and filled them with fish and birds. He founded cities and established kingship and rule over foreign countries. In “The Debate between Winter and Summer,” an unknown Sumerian author explains that summer and winter, abundance, spring floods, and fertility are the result of Enlil’s copulation with the hills of the earth.

Another early second-millennium Sumerian myth, “Enki and the World Order,” provides an explanation as to why the world appears organized. Enki decided that the world had to be well managed to avoid chaos. Various gods were thus assigned management responsibilities that included overseeing the waters, crops, building activities, control of wildlife, and herding of domestic animals, as well as oversight of the heavens and earth and the activities of women.

According to the Sumerian story “Enki and Ninmah,” the lesser gods, burdened with the toil of creating the earth, complained to Namma, the primeval mother, about their hard work. She in turn roused her son Enki, the god of wisdom, and urged him to create a substitute to free the gods from their toil. Namma then kneaded some clay, placed it in her womb, and gave birth to the first humans.

Babylonian poets, like their Sumerian counterparts, had no single explanation for creation. Diverse stories regarding creation were incorporated into other types of texts. Most prominently, the Babylonian creation story Enuma Elish is a theological legitimization of the rise of Marduk as the supreme god in Babylon, replacing Enlil, the former head of the pantheon. The poem was most likely compiled during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I in the later twelfth century B.C., or possibly a short time afterward. At this time, Babylon, after many centuries of rule by the foreign Kassite dynasty, achieved political and cultural independence. The poem celebrates the ascendancy of the city and acts as a political tractate explaining how Babylon came to succeed the older city of Nippur as the center of religious festivals.

The poem itself has 1,091 lines written on seven tablets. It opens with a theogony, the descent of the gods, set in a time frame prior to creation of the heavens and earth. At that time, the ocean waters, called Tiamat, and her husband, the freshwater Apsu, mingled, with the result that several gods emerged in pairs. Like boisterous children, the gods produced so much noise that Apsu decided to do away with them. Tiamat, more indulgent than her spouse, urged patience, but Apsu, stirred to action by his vizier, was unmoved. The gods, stunned by the prospect of death, called on the resourceful god Ea to save them. Ea recited a spell that made Apsu sleep. He then killed Apsu and captured Mummu, his vizier. Ea and his wife Damkina then gave birth to the hero Marduk, the tallest and mightiest of the gods. Marduk, given control of the four winds by the sky god Anu, is told to let the winds whirl. Picking up dust, the winds create storms that upset and confound Tiamat. Other gods suddenly appear and complain that they, too, cannot sleep because of the hurricane winds. They urge Tiamat to do battle against Marduk so that they can rest. Tiamat agrees and decides to confront Marduk. She prepares for battle by having the mother goddess create eleven monsters. Tiamat places the monsters in charge of her new spouse, Qingu, who she elevates to rule over all the gods. When Ea hears of the preparations for battle, he seeks advice from his father, Anshar, king of the junior gods. Anshar urges Ea and afterward his brother Anu to appease the goddess with incantations. Both return frightened and demoralized by their failure. The young warrior god Marduk then volunteers his strength in return for a promise that, if victorious, he will become king of the gods. The gods agree, a battle ensues, and Marduk vanquishes Tiamat and Qingu, her host. Marduk then uses Tiamat’s carcass for the purpose of creation. He splits her in half, “like a dried fish,” and places one part on high to become the heavens, the other half to be the earth. As sky is now a watery mass, Marduk stretches her skin to the heavens to prevent the waters from escaping, a motif that explains why there is so little rainfall in southern Iraq. With the sky now in place, Marduk organizes the constellations of the stars. He lays out the calendar by assigning three stars to each month, creates his own planet, makes the moon appear, and establishes the sun, day, and night. From various parts of Tiamat’s body, he creates the clouds, winds, mists, mountains, and earth.

The myth continues as the gods swear allegiance to the mighty king and create Babylon and his temple, the Esagila, a home where the gods can rest during their sojourn upon the earth. The myth conveniently ignores Nippur, the holy city esteemed by both the Sumerians and the rulers of Kassite Babylonia. Babylon has replaced Nippur as the dwelling place of the gods.

Meanwhile, Marduk fulfills an earlier promise to provide provisions for the junior gods if he gains victory as their supreme leader. He then creates humans from the blood of Qingu, the slain and rebellious consort of Tiamat. He does this for two reasons: first, in order to release the gods from their burdensome menial labors, and second, to provide a continuous source of food and drink to temples.

The gods then celebrate and pronounce Marduk’s fifty names, each an aspect of his character and powers. The composition ends by stating that this story and its message (presumably the importance of kingship to the maintenance of order) should be preserved for future generations and pondered by those who are wise and knowledgeable. It should also be used by parents and teachers to instruct so that the land may flourish and its inhabitants prosper.

The short tale “Marduk, Creator of the World” is another Babylonian narrative that opens with the existence of the sea before any act of creation. First to be created are the cities, Eridu and Babylon, and the temple Esagil is founded. Then the earth is created by heaping dirt upon a raft in the primeval waters. Humankind, wild animals, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the marshlands and canebrake, vegetation, and domesticated animals follow. Finally, palm groves and forests appear. Just before the composition becomes fragmentary and breaks off, Marduk is said to create the city of Nippur and its temple, the Ekur, and the city of Uruk, with its temple Eanna.

“The Creation of Humankind” is a bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian story also referred to in scholarly literature as KAR 4. This account begins after heaven was separated from earth, and features of the earth such as the Tigris, Euphrates, and canals established. At that time, the god Enlil addressed the gods asking what should next be accomplished. The answer was to create humans by killing Alla-gods and creating humans from their blood. Their purpose will be to labor for the gods, maintaining the fields and irrigation works in order to create bountiful harvests, celebrate the gods’ rites, and attain wisdom through study.

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